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FM AMEMBASSY CARACAS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3931
INFO RUCNMEM/EU MEM COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHBO/AMEMBASSY BOGOTA PRIORITY 6257
RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA PRIORITY 5353
RUEHLP/AMEMBASSY LA PAZ PRIORITY 1863
RUEHPE/AMEMBASSY LIMA PRIORITY 0069
RUEHQT/AMEMBASSY QUITO PRIORITY 1938
RUEHME/AMEMBASSY MEXICO PRIORITY 3667
RUEHOT/AMEMBASSY OTTAWA PRIORITY 0648
RUEHBU/AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES PRIORITY 1117
RUEHSG/AMEMBASSY SANTIAGO PRIORITY 3414
RUEHMU/AMEMBASSY MANAGUA PRIORITY 1117
RUEHDG/AMEMBASSY SANTO DOMINGO PRIORITY 0105
RUEHMO/AMEMBASSY MOSCOW PRIORITY 0301
RUEHAO/AMCONSUL CURACAO PRIORITY 0714
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 0075
RUEHMI/USOFFICE FRC FT LAUDERDALE PRIORITY 2967
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RUMIAAA/HQ USSOUTHCOM MIAMI FL PRIORITY
RUEHUB/USINT HAVANA PRIORITY 0615

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FOR FRC LAMBERT

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/04/2026

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [MASS](#) [VE](#)

SUBJECT: BETTER LATE THAN NEVER: RUSSIAN CHOPPERS ARRIVE
IN VENEZUELA

REF: A. 05 BOGOTA 00894

[1](#)B. 05 BOGOTA 03863

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT R. DOWNES FOR 1.4 (D)

[1](#)1. (U) Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez presided over the formal handover of three Russian MI-17 helicopters to the Venezuelan Army's helicopter battalion in Yaracuy State on April 3. The three aircraft, which arrived in Venezuela unassembled on February 21, are part of a contract Chavez announced he signed with Russia for 10 MI-17s in September [1](#)2004. Officials from Russian arms export firm Rosoboronexport had announced the helicopters would arrive in late 2005, but the press reported that Venezuelan pilots did not complete their training in Russia until December. According to commander of the army Raul Baduel, Russia will also help the BRV establish a plant to help maintain the helicopters.

[1](#)2. (U) During the ceremony, Chavez blustered that the Pentagon would be on "orange alert" because of the purchase of the three helicopters. Chavez also claimed he would seek Russian fighter planes because of the difficulty Venezuela has had obtaining F-16 parts from the United States. Finally, he announced a total of 15 helicopters--including MI-26 and MI-35 models--would be delivered by the end of [1](#)2006. According to the most recent announcements from Venezuelan officials, the BRV hopes to sign two more contracts with Russia to obtain a total of 33 or 35 helicopters. (Embassy Note: Reports of what the two countries are signing have varied widely, probably because the BRV often inks letters of agreement that do not carry legal weight.)

[1](#)3. (U) Defense Minister Orlando Maniglia told reporters the MI-17s would be used for patrols, rescue operations, and

forest fires along the Venezuelan border. During the televised handover ceremony, Venezuelan troops showed off their search and rescue training. Notwithstanding Maniglia's stated intention, the military apparently envisions a combat role for the helicopters, as well. Although the MI-17 was designed primarily as a transport helicopter, the three Venezuelan models have been outfitted as gunships. The military also demonstrated how the helicopters could deliver a howitzer.

Comment

14. (C) Chavez' timeline may be overambitious, given Venezuela's track record at procuring arms on schedule. For now, it appears at least that the original MI-17 deal is settled, even if the delivery of the seven remaining units does not transpire right away. The MI-17s probably do not upset the regional balance of power. Venezuela's poorly run armed forces seem incapable thus far of integrating sophisticated equipment into combat. The reality of the threat may not matter, though, as the impact of arms purchases will depend in part on the perception of the Colombian military (REFTELS).

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